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Female Identity in the 20th Century Polish Poetry: Between Androgyny and Essentialism.

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Female Identity in the 20th Century Polish Poetry: Between Androgyny and Essentialism.¹

Although discussing female identity in poetry necessarily involves theory, the main aim of this essay is to propose fresh readings and new interpretations of literary texts. The achievements of 20th century feminism range from new reflections on gender and developments in psychoanalytical theory to a denouncement of the patriarchal order that results in a phallogocentric dominance of one gender in language. One cannot speak, however, of a unitary approach: the very the notion of female identity as such is sometimes questioned – both by feminist thought and by postmodern philosophy – of the subject which rejects the idea of a fixed, essentialist Self. Distinguishing a “female identity” could thus be seen as an element of gender politics.² Doubts regarding female identity resurface also in the psychoanalytical tradition, especially in its Lacanian incarnation that assumes the existence of one (male) identity in the Symbolic order and perceives “womanhood” as a “lack.”³ This approach, re-interpreted and adapted by Julia Kristeva, is not necessarily misogynist.

I will treat the existing body of feminist texts as a point of reference offering several theories of identities, as to speak of a single “identity” would be normative and restrictive in itself, possibly also contradictory to the internal logic of self-definition inscribed in the discussed literary texts. Feminism embraces varied

¹ The following essay expands on the presentation given at the 32th Theoretical-Literary Conference organized by Uniwersytet Jagielloński and Institute of Literary Research in Janowice, September 2003.

² J. Butler *Gender trouble. Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, London, New York 1990.

³ P. Dybel „Refleksje wokół diagramu różnicy seksualnej Jacquesa Lacana.” [Reflecting on Lacan’s diagram of sexual difference] *Krytyka feministyczna. Siostra teorii i historii literatury*. G. Borkowska, L. Sikorska (eds.) Warszawa, 2000. 30-42.

theoretical concepts of womanhood: from the one that posits it as a heterogeneous element in constant motion, as a “happening” identity, not always present and never finalized that emerges from Kristeva’s writing⁴ to the utopian *écriture féminine* inspired by Hélène Cixous.⁵ The latter also posits the need to view the female voice as revolutionary and transgressive, one that establishes its own order and subverts heterosexual dominance. I do not aim to present the full range of theoretical writing on female identity in an article as short as this. Instead, I would like to designate within it a possibly broad field of differences or, perhaps even, contradictions, which is also what dictated my choice of literary texts that exemplify certain extremes or verbalize the problem and present its internal tensions.

Iłakowiczówna the poet

Who was Iłakowiczówna? In the minds of her readers she was or is first and foremost a poet. But there were other determinants of her existence and fate, and her textual auto-creations include areas of non-identity that need to be talked about. Even my opening claim – that she “was a poet” [“poetka”, *fem. sg.*]⁶ – must be taken with reservation. Anatol Stern, for instance, referencing Iłakowiczówna in one of his critical essays, referred to her using the male form of “poet.” Stern says: “Our country has been fortunate with poets [*fem. pl.*]. This goes as far back as to Urszula Kochanowska... Our country has also been fortunate with poets [*male. pl.*] that were female, such as Maria Pawlikowska, Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna and others”⁷ – Stern proceeds to discuss a volume of poetry by another author, forgotten today, whom he believes to deserve a place in our memory. Many years later Michał Głowiński used a similar critical concept referring to the work of Wisława Szymborska on the day she was awarded honorary doctorate by Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Głowiński also felt the need to comment on his decision to use the masculine:

⁴ J. Bator „Julia Kristeva – kobieta i symboliczna rewolucja.” [Julia Kristeva – woman and symbolica revolution] *Teksty Drugie*. 2000 Vol. 6.

⁵ *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Cixous also believed that breaking the dominance is tied also to the avant-garde literary practice and in this spirit interpreted the writing of Genet and Joyce. See also: H. Cixous *Prénoms du personne*, Paris 1974; H. Cixous *Entre l’Ecriture Des Femmes*, Paris 1986; T. Moi *Hélène Cixous: An Imaginary Utopia*, w: *Sexual/Textual Politics, Feminist Literary Theory*, London and New York 1987. 102-125.

⁶ The vast majority of Polish nouns are gendered: English “poet” translates thus to Polish as both “poetka” (*fem. sg. nom.*) or “poeta” (*masc. sg. nom.*); introducing Iłakowiczówna in the opening paragraph (“she was or is first and foremost a poet”) Nasiłowska uses the female form “była ... poetką.” [*fem. sg. instrum.*] For future reference it will be important to mention that also the poet’s surname is gendered with the fem. ending “-ówna,” a practice common in her day. (AW)

⁷ A. Stern „Poezja młodych.” *Głód jednoznaczności i inne szkice*, Warszawa 1972.139. (ZN) Stern uses the female form [„poetek” *pl. genitive*] in the first sentence, and in the second part he speaks of “women-poets” [“-poetów” *masc., pl., genitive*]. In Polish: „Kraj nasz ma szczęście do poetek. [...] Kraj nasz ma szczęście również do kobiet-poetów, takich jak Maria Pawlikowska, Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna i inne.” (AW)

Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

I am doing this because our language endowed the male form with the privilege of generality. Using the feminine to say that she is a “great poet” [poetka, *fem. sg.*] I would suggest, despite my intentions, that she is superior among female poets and such restriction would be very much out of place here. “Poeta” [*masc. sg.*] describes everyone devoted to creating poetry, regardless of gender and it is, thus, universal.⁸

Both Stern and Głowiński use the masculine as a compliment whose wording is one of the *loci communes* of literary criticism, a popular device used to show appreciation..

Reading Iłkiewiczówna’s early writing, one discovers that the hesitation regarding her status as a “poetka” or “poeta” was inscribed in her first poetic attempts. Her first volume, *Ikarowe loty* [Icarian Flights] was published in 1912 in Cracow under the name I.K. Iłkiewicz [devoid of the *fem.* ending]. A year later she found herself in a guest house in Zakopane where, as a result of her recent literary success, she was seated at the table next to Stefan Żeromski whose work she passionately read. Noticing a young person Żeromski started a small talk asking initially about “skies and bobsleighs.” As none of the topics worked, the company at the table hinted that the young lady wrote and even published literature.

“So, are you by any chance related to...” he asked hesitantly.

“Yes, yes” I interrupted knowing what was coming and said “Actually, not related. I wrote those poems myself.”

The face of my great neighbor went dark, slowly turning to stone, his eyes lost interest and kindness.

”Dear God” he said flatly „I.K.Iłkiewicz is a woman!”

He turned away and never looked at me again.⁹

Iłkiewiczówna never commented on this anecdote. She referenced it again only once, in passing and ironically: “Since I had the same name as the ‘young, incredibly gifted Iłkiewicz,’ I became the center of attention.”¹⁰

In defense of Stefan Żeromski, who was unable to cope gracefully with the social confusion, one should add that indeed from the poems collected in *Ikarowe loty* there emerges a male persona of the “young, incredibly gifted Iłkiewicz.” Nine of the poems use past tense verb forms indicating a male speaker, seven poems use female forms. The remaining ones (constituting a majority) can be interpreted both ways: some echoing poems by male authors, and others – those traditionally attributed to the female utterance – are exemplified by lullaby or folk-inspired fairy-tale.

The construction of the book seems to imply that the male forms will prevail while the female remain a lyrical role, a series of poetic incarnations of the “unbelievably sensitive Iłkiewicz.” It opens with a series of program lyrics, or a *Weltanschauung*

⁸ In: „Radość czytania Szymborskiej.” *Wybór szkiców krytycznych* red. S. Balbus, D. Wojda (eds.) Kraków 1996. 46.

⁹ K. Iłkiewiczówna *Trzydniński zając*, Kraków 1968. 89.

¹⁰ K. Iłkiewiczówna *O muzyce i Szymanowskim*, w: *Wspomnienia i reportaże*. Warszawa 1997. 179.

declaration. Such is the message of the title poem, "Ikarowe loty" [Icarian Flights] proclaiming a liberation of the human spirit, a will to power, and a cult of heroism.

And so my life is laughing at me today:
I thought that I would fall, broken down by yearning
That I will be dragging my shattered wings through dust¹¹

Masculine verb forms („bom sądził” i „będę włóki”) are used for the first time in the fourth stanza of the five but from the very beginning the poem exhibits features tied to the male cultural pattern that could be interpreted as signaling masculinity, as well as clear literary reminiscences of Leopold Staff's will of power from *Sny o potęgze* [Dreams of Power] (1901) and Mickiewicz's "Ode to Youth." The latter echoes even more loudly in the second poem of the volume, "Bunt młodości" [Rebellion of the Youth] and lyrics that follow further add to the constructed image of the speaking subject who declares the end of melancholy and praises rebellion, transforming into Icarus, Pilgrim and Samson, someone feeling a strong bond with their generation and ready to meet the demands of heroism, including a possible participation in the patriotic goals. Such a declaration on the eve of the Great War seemed very timely. The sense of community is expressed through the repetitive use of the plural "we" and certainly implies a collective willingness to fight: in other words, military preparedness. At the same time, the speaker is very much aware of the spiritual dilemmas of the recent past, which in turn are associated with the female word "soul." The lyrical tension is born between the soul whose weakness needs to be overcome and the spirit, declarations of power, and the willingness to act in the real world. Poems such as these foreshadowed, in a way, the activism and vitality of the Skamander group. Tortured wombs, angels, graves, funerals and souls are all part of the symbolic inheritance, re-evaluated with the thought of a brighter, heroic future. It is not until the seventh poem in the volume, "Tęsknota do życia" [A Longing for Life] that the feminine forms appear, but the verse itself is stylized into a fairy-tale. Its speaker is a "shadow of a princess" who, "clad in stolen radiance" and suspended between life and illusion, dreams the dream of a soul. The dream, too, ends with a victory of life.

This is followed by a thematically linked series centered around the confession of a lover. He awaits death in the arms of his beloved („Półsen" [Half-asleep]), dreams of the dead („Umarła panienska ukazuje się spoczywającemu" ["Dead Girl Appears to the Dreamer]), yearns, sings to a rose, and becomes a poor prince. Here, however, following a few clearly distinct poems, returns the fairy-tale character: in the song of the orphan, in the lament of the sick and the cycle in which those poems are included is titled "Shadows," immediately suggesting role-playing which allows to move freely between masculinity and femininity. Similarly, in the succeeding three cycles, male and female voices are treated interchangeably.

¹¹ K. Iłakowiczówna „Ikarowe loty.” *Poezje zebrane*. [Icarian Flights. Collected Poems] J. Biesiada, A. Żurawska- Włoszczyńska (eds.), Toruń 1999 Vol.1. p. 23. (Here trans. by AW)

The femininity of the speaker is clearly marked only as late as in “Pieśń o lesie” [Song of the Forest] – the last, very extensive poem of the volume, dated 1908, and which is rich in biographical references. They appear, however, only in the fourth part of the poem that itself could be seen as speaking in several voices. Earlier passages speak of sadness, include a poetic description of a forest, and then the so called aetiological history – a kind of legendary-mythical genesis of a forest lake followed by a reference to Leon Plater’s death in the January Uprising. Only in the last part does the poem mention wild bellflowers, the mother’s favorite flowers, whose language the poor and orphaned (the feminine form of the adjectives clearly indicates a woman) cannot understand.

While markers of femininity are not given prime importance in the volume, poems utilizing male subjectivity and referencing traditionally masculine gender characteristics do not exhibit features found in the poetry of mask or role-playing – they use the confession of strong internal emotionality referring to the undefined (as it is internalized) male “I” translated to “us” that is not given a clear personal construction. Reading it as a role-playing would necessitate referencing other than textual knowledge of the author’s gender, which in turn, seems too big of a shortcut.

Itakowicz the feminist

Before one begins to attribute masculinity to Itakowicz, more needs to be said about the poet herself. Already around the time of her literary debut her feminist consciousness was uniquely developed. She received an education in Cracow, and earlier, in England. We know little about her studies in Oxford, where her time was probably largely spent on overcoming the language barrier. Later (in 1908, it is unclear for how long precisely) she studied at a London school for women located on Church Street and lead by an Irishwoman, Mme D’Esterre, called Amica. The school was actually a kind of women phalanstery whose life was organized around intellectual pursuits; it followed a strictly vegetarian diet and inhabiting students (foreigners and girls from poorer families) did not pay tuition but had to help with housework. They wore uniforms resembling togas and small round caps that provoked the curiosity of onlookers but solved the problem of buying clothes. Tuition fees were obligatory only for the non-inhabiting students, among them wives of Members of Parliament, ministers, and Anglican clergy.

The curriculum of the house of “Simple Life” included what today would be called courses in rhetoric and literature (English, French and German). It emphasized the importance of practical skills such as discussion, argumentation, presenting and defending one’s opinion, the preparation of speeches, and public speaking. These were trained during actual discussions and presentations on various abstract subjects.¹² It seems that Itakowiczówna utilized the skills acquired in London in the 1920’s and 30’s while preparing speeches commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs aimed at winning support for the Polish cause abroad and presenting the

¹² K. Itakowiczówna *Trzymyński zając*, s. 40-44.

moral aspects of the Poland's political position. She presented one of the texts for editing to her already seventy-five year-old teacher, offering remuneration. Amica, however, was moved by what she read and refused to accept the money. The speeches were indeed riveting in their literary character, as evidenced by "Jak to się dzieje, że nasi nieprzyjaciele naprawdę godni są miłości" [How It Is Possible That Our Enemies Truly Deserve Love] presented in 1934 in Geneva, Prague, and Copenhagen. It supported the idea of "moral disarmament" advocated by the Polish diplomacy with the hope of avoiding the conflict that later developed into WWII. In her speech, Iłakowiczówna did not reach for political or moral arguments (like those resulting from the Christian ethic) but presented her own, very individualistic vision relying on personal and poetic experience.¹³

During her stay in England at a young age she also became familiar with the work of Pankhurst women, and participated in the distribution of suffragist brochures and newsletters herself. She sold them in London, which was not safe and could have resulted in strict police sanctions.¹⁴ It also led to a conflict with the independence activist Marian Dąbrowski, who Polish literary theory knows as the husband of Maria Dąbrowska (the author of *Noce i dnie*), and who believed feminism to be harmful and contrary to the goals of Polish independence.

The practicing of patriotism was for Iłakowiczówna also an occasion to cross the boundaries of traditional gender roles. Already as a child, reading Sienkiewicz's *The Trilogy*, she identified with the protagonists: "I was Bohun, I was Kmicic."¹⁵ In the fervent atmosphere of preparation for military action she wrote a letter from London to Józef Piłsudski, whom she knew personally, offering her services as *aide-de-camp*. For this purpose she also enrolled in a shooting course and had some success until she was asked to shoot live pigeons. Iłakowiczówna refused dryly, informing her instructor that since the Muscovites did not fly, she saw no point in killing innocent birds. Raised by the Plater family (after her mother's death she was under the care of Zofia Plater-Zyberkova), the poet must have remembered the history of Emilia Plater. In Liksna upon Dźwina she was shown the place where Emilia, as a child, was believed to have kept a flower garden. The family of the heroine, however, was full of reservation regarding her activities – Iłakowiczówna quotes one of the aunts:

"Because she went into the woods with a gun and caused a lot of trouble to those gentlemen... Imagine how embarrassing it must have been for them!"¹⁶

¹³ Text based on the version printed in Polish in the Polish press. In: *Wspomnienia i reportaże*. 28-54.

¹⁴ K. Iłakowiczówna *Ścieżka obok drogi*, Warszawa 1939. 39-41. Emmeline and her daughter, Christabel Pankhurst fought for the voting rights of women, attempting first to put the matter of the vote on the Parliament agenda. Since 1905, they were deeply conflicted with the police authorities, the fight for the suffragist cause entailed the loss of life among protesting women.

¹⁵ K. Iłakowiczówna *Niewczesne wynurzenia*, Warszawa 1958. 232.

¹⁶ K. Iłakowiczówna *Trazymeński zając*. 115!

Piłsudski rejected the offer but wrote back, explaining that women cannot serve in the army except for performing auxiliary tasks, he added, however, that there exist no boundaries that a strong and persevering individual could not overcome.¹⁷ Hłakowiczówna tore his long letter to pieces, taking offense for several years. In January 1915, she began service in a Polish medical unit in the Russian army. Working as a nurse during an epidemic she fell very ill and experienced religious conversion.

Her regained religious faith never changed Hłakowiczówna's attitude towards feminism. In the memoirs of the interwar period she repeatedly returns to her experiences as a professionally active, independent woman, a free one as well – that is, not tied to a man. She was one of the very few women given independent positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which often led to problems that she reminisces about in her memoirs. Doubts were expressed, for instance, whether a woman could serve as a diplomatic courier. Once she won the position, the poet was handed heavy parcels and offered no help nor protection. After one of the parcels was opened in the Polish embassy in Berlin, it turned out that it contained a sizeable ham sent as a gift to the ambassador. She remained in touch with European feminist organizations and several of her lectures promoting Poland were organized by local groups of educated women, which proved particularly fruitful in the Balkans. She always emphasized the special nature of these contacts and the unbelievable ability of women to overcome organizational difficulties and prejudice, resulting from their non-traditional attitudes.¹⁸

Her dream of serving Piłsudski as an aide was fulfilled, although differently than expected, after the May Coup d'État when she accepted, not without hesitation, the position and title of "Secretary of the Minister of Military Affairs." She believed the role to be difficult, bureaucratic and burdensome. It involved, she says in *Ścieżka obok drogi*, answering letters in Marshall's name so that he would not have to deal with this particular task personally. Those included pleas for help, complaints about local authorities, pleas for financial support, and which came in the thousands every month. She was the only woman in a company of men, military men, who were often hostile to her, and generally biased against women. Addressing her nieces in the memoirs she offered advice on overcoming the reluctance of male colleagues.

I do not know if in the future women are going to work in offices, and if they are, if they are going to have to fight against their colleagues' instinctive hostility towards their very presence in their place of work, and on equal footing, as we do today. But should nothing change in this respect, you must remember that the woman's greatest enemy is not her biased colleague but her own nervousness. If persecution mania is allowed to develop along with a sense of martyrdom, if your good mood is lost, you have just defeated yourself. Nothing will save you then.¹⁹

¹⁷ K. Hłakowiczówna *Ścieżka obok drogi*, s. 41, jest to omówienie zapamiętanego tekstu, nie cytat.

¹⁸ See remarks on women in Bulgaria and Romania in: *Wspomnienia i reportaże*.

¹⁹ K. Hłakowiczówna *Ścieżka obok drogi*. 234.

Today, we would say that she was a victim of gender discrimination. By fulfilling a public function Iłakowiczówna was also very aware of the customary social expectations regarding clothes (day suit, afternoon dress, evening gown), hairstyle (obligatory permanent weave, regular visits to the salon), or hats (one does not appear bareheaded in public). She argued with a tailor who suggested a dress she deemed too short, believing that her position required a classical style rather than a slavish adherence to current fashion. She always traveled with several suitcases and a hat box. In other words, she did not shun purely extrinsic forms tied to the notion of womanhood, public position, norms of conduct, and the fact of representation. In the moments when the issue resurfaces one glimpses clear signs of a narcissistic satisfaction resulting from successfully meeting particularly strict demands, or – on the contrary – signs of narcissistic anxiety regarding those demands. During the making of a documentary on people surrounding Marshall Piłsudski, she was unhappy with her old, patched dress and unfavorable appearance: “My chin extended from shoulders to the lips and I looked like Tsarina Catherine II in the last years of her rule.”²⁰ Such complaints are typical of a woman anxious about her appearance and subjecting herself to harsh self-control. As a writer she can compensate the anxiety with self-irony, but she does not negate the constant care for external form and a sense of dependence on external evaluation.

Androgyne and the child

In the tale of Iłakowiczówna meanings first seem inclined towards masculinity only to indicate femininity later on. Interpretations alluding to gender identity disorders should be rejected, however, as relying on open and ungrounded psychologism. I will add only that in my use of biographical material I refer exclusively to Iłakowiczówna’s own written testimony, remaining within the scope of her point of view.

Her identity seems to present itself as an unsolvable riddle, a paradox, but nothing justifies a potential claim that we are dealing with something dangerous or pathological. It is not an act of transgression, nor a case of gender disorder – as it was with Maria Komornicka.

One could definitely say that as much as there are attempts in contemporary Polish feminism to enforce the policy of using female forms to refer to professions and functions exercised by women, at the beginning of the 20th century feminist consciousness entailed a fight for the right to use the masculine to refer to women. Grammatical forms are often ideologized, as evidenced by Dennis Baron in *Grammar and Gender*.²¹ And so, today one will meet women referring to themselves using the feminine forms of professions such as literary critic, historian of ideas, anthropologist, or sociologist. Meanwhile, Iłakowiczówna used the masculine when she said was a minister’s secretary, diplomatic courier, civil servant – and she wanted to be

²⁰ Ibidem, 175.

²¹ D. Baron *Grammar and Gender*, New Haven and London 1986.

an aide-de-camp [*masc*] – those are the forms used in her memoirs. It was, in the majority of cases, her own choice, only the function of “Secretary of the Minister of Military Affairs” [*masc.*] was named so by Piłsudski. Such a form was meant to express the independence and the autonomy of her position, putting distance between Iłakowiczówna and the military men surrounding her, immunizing her from the attempts to form cliques, and isolating her from the potential intrigue. All of this also required a certain personal predisposition that Piłsudski expressed (and Iłakowiczówna repeated not without approval) in following words: “In the army you are not a woman, you are Kazia.”²² Iłakowiczówna never tied herself to a man and the issue of romantic relationships with men (or women) never resurfaces in her memoirs. In other people’s memoirs of her one may find vague allusions to a great, never expressed love for a married aristocrat.

The fact of overlapping of different identities that refer automatically to mutually exclusive biological definitions of man or woman should be approached as a grammatical inconvenience that enforces an inevitable choice – “either/or” – on every language user. If you are a man you use masculine inflection, if you are a woman you use the feminine – such is the simple (not to say vulgar) instruction absorbed unconsciously by the language user that is also one of the elements of the male domination in the language.²³

Iłakowiczówna’s writing exhibits a clear attempt to construct a complex identification which includes different ranges: the male and the female, as well as the childish, in the poetic work. The categories of cultural anthropology would describe it with the term of “cultural valence” used by Antonina Kłoskowska to discuss the situation of people belonging to, or living on, the ethnic fringes of two (or more) cultures. Bivalence (or polyvalence) is a sense of belonging fully to two or more cultures at the same time, without the need to choose (ambivalence). One can be thus both a Jew and a Pole, or – today – for instance, a Pole and an American. Viewing Iłakowiczówna’s writing through feminist categories we face a whole range of issues: a fight against gender patterns enclosing women in the restrictive gender ideal, a conscious attempt at emancipation, and finally, acts of subversive overstepping of boundaries and rebellion against the requirements of a patriarchal grammar. Finally, androgyny as described by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, is understood as an opportunity to combine the elements of both genders.

Let us take a look at the following sentence that appears grammatically shocking. “Widely renown ophthalmologist [*masc. sg.*], Dr Fugulian, is also a great cook [*fem. sg.*] and hostess.” It comes from the poetic prose of *Z rozbitego fotoplastikonu*,²⁴ one of Iłakowiczówna’s first attempts at writing a war memoir. Earlier, the character of Fugulian appears just once and in the feminine (“[she] started fire”). The quoted sentence opens the second paragraph, and it is thus clearly exposed and immediately

²² K. Iłakowiczówna *Ścieżka obok...* 237.

²³ K. Handke „Język a determinanty płci.” *Język a kultura*. Vol. 9, *Pleć w języku i kulturze*. J. Anusiewicz, K. Handke (eds.) Wrocław 1994. 15-30.

²⁴ K. Iłakowiczówna, XX. *Z rozbitego fotoplastikonu*. Warszawa 1957. 42.

draws attention with its grammatical eccentricity, and with the impossibility of the proposed construct. It de-constructs every essentialist vision. As a doctor, Fugulian is a “renown ophthalmologist [*masc. sg.*]” while remaining “a great cook [*fem. sg.*] and hostess.” Femininity and masculinity exist simultaneously, parallel, repealing the “either/or.” This is only the beginning of the character presentation, further on femininity outweighs masculinity. What follows is a description of extremely complicated procedures performed in an improvised kitchen and their strangeness, resulting from cultural difference, turns them into a kind of transformative ritual that involves not only people, but also water and herbs, and the entire surrounding.

That Hłakowiczówna supported the ideal of androgyny, typical of liberal feminism of the first half of the 20th century, is something completely forgotten today. She is simply believed to have been a Catholic poet, probably as a result of her meditative and prayer poems, the legends of saints that she wrote, and her declarations of faith. She often used masculine grammatical forms but kept the feminine ending of her surname, even though she could have easily abandoned it. There were administrative pressures after the war to abandon traditional endings such as –owa and –ówna (or –ina, -lina) since it was sometimes difficult to reconstruct the basic – in other words, male – form of the name that used the ending. Hłakowiczówna bore her mother’s name: her biological father died in unknown circumstances and she was born out of wedlock. The fact that her father was a son of Tomasz Zan, a philomath and Mickiewicz’s friend, was mythologized only after her death as it had a potential to transform into larger poetic legend. Hłakowiczówna herself built her self-creation around a different fact, namely, that she had two mothers, both very loving. She bore a great sense of guilt towards the foster mother, who looked after her after the death of the biological one, during a turbulent period of adolescence and of gaining independence.

Hłakowiczówna never wrote a straightforward memoir but her entire prose, without exception, relies on memory, uses lived experience, and refers to the past and undoubtedly authorial “Self.” The pre-war *Ścieżka obok drogi* (1938) [The Path Next To The Road], intended as didactic propaganda, did not foreshadow the emergence of a prosaic talent and for several reasons was not well received. It is an odd work which fails to successfully combine the educational and patriotic attempt at presenting a heroic leader with a very individual point of view, resulting in a false mannerism and tone. These reservations do not apply to the post-war books: to the already mentioned cycle *Z rozbitego fotoplastikonu* [From a Broken Kaiser-Panorama] (1957) which could be classified as poetic prose, to *Niewczesne wymurzenia* [Untimely Confessions] (1958), and *Trazymeński zajac* [Trasimeno Hare] (1968), nor to the pre-war essays. *Niewczesne wymurzenia* and *Trazymeński zajac* refer to childhood, the interwar years and the poet’s travels that revealed to her the relativity of all customs believed to be universal and non-debatable, and to the years 1939-1948, when she stayed in Transylvania, immersed in the Romanian-Hungarian context and supporting herself by teaching languages.

The poet’s memoirs are always arranged in very particular constellations of remembered impressions, shards, and fragments. Despite reservations concerning the

failings of memory [*lit.* “hare memory”], Illakowiczówna’s descriptions are precise, and events, once related, are not retold, except for an occasional reference serving as a reminder to the reader. Her narrative memoirs are never composed chronologically, each time forming a “bundle” arranged discontinuously. In my attempt to relate the attitude to femininity and masculinity thematized in all of her books, I had to perform a very drastic procedure of arranging the elements according to a pre-conceived interpretative key while in fact in her writing the issue is dispersed among several others. The title of *Z rozbitego fotoplastikonu* is a very accurate formal description. Events spin, the meaning is fluid.

“The world is a special place to which I could never quite get used to. From the earliest days of childhood I have always had a strange sense of a constant provisional, temporality, of non-finality. Things seemed to me and then completely suddenly they would stop being what they seemed.”²⁵ This declaration opens the lecture I mentioned earlier, presenting the Polish idea for the reconciliation of nations on the international forum. “I believe non-crystallization to be the fundament of poetic personalization” the poet continues “What I need around me is not an emptiness or rigidity but a certain fluidity, a flexible chaos from which I can tear away molecules that I need to shape my worlds.”²⁶ It is a clearly anti-essentialist declaration. After *Ikarowe Loty* Illakowiczówna never repeated the early experiment with the hiding of gender but she never stopped blurring it either. What is important is that it is a kind of identity shaped completely outside the field of romantic relationships with men, unrelated to it, and including a broad range of varied roles. She very often draws upon the sphere of the subconscious, tied to childhood.²⁷ Apart from masculinity and femininity, the poet discovers the stratum of the child and there are several instances in her work supporting Kristeva’s claim that the poetic sphere belongs to the semiotic range of the relationship with the mother. In echolalia, in childish imagination, in the mythological imagination, in the music of the word and the rhythm of the poem, joy (*jouissance*) expresses itself directed elsewhere than the masculine symbolic order. It is a very broad sphere in this particular poet, a sphere that is safe and undoubtedly poetic, though at the same time unable to go outside itself to question the hostile order.

Identity of the body

Attempts to present the biological determination of feminine otherness are the most pronounced version of female identity expressed in Polish poetry. It is a formulation based on a clearly essentialist premise which, from the very beginning,

²⁵ K. Illakowiczówna, „Jak to się dzieje, że nasi nieprzyjaciele naprawdę godni są miłości.” *Wspomnienia...* 28.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 29.

²⁷ I emphasize the childhood element in my interpretation of Illakowiczówna’s work in „Ciemne światło dzieciństwa. O Kazimierze Illakowiczównie.” *Tygodnik Powszechny* (1999) No. 37.

foreshadows difficulties to describe it with the categories of Western feminism. It is also easily explainable: the most important poetic achievements in this field happened after 1956, in the 60s in the case of Małgorzata Hillar and in the 70s for Anna Świrszczyńska, while Western traditions feminism became the subject of academic and artistic debate in Poland as late as 1989. In other words, after the poets discussed on the following pages already passed away or stopped participating in the artistic life. New stimuli in the feminist discussion found their expression not in poetry but in prose, which is tied to the emergence of the voice of a new generation among whom a unique polarization of attitudes can be observed: many young male writers manifest their traditionalism, or even open misogyny, while several versions of feminism dominate in the prose written by women (Izabela Filipiak, Manuela Gretkowska, Olga Tokarczuk)

The “feminist revolt” in Polish poetry happened much earlier, and Simone de Beauvoir’s famous claim that “one is not born a woman” does not really correspond to it. Womanhood given by birth and giving birth, femininity as a state and an absolute way of being in the world, biological and corporeal, became the most frequently presented dimension of female identity. The very word “feminism,” used in Poland on regular basis before WWII (also by Iłakowiczówna) vanished from the public discourse in the decades of the People’s Republic. The feminist movement was strictly licensed and controlled ideologically during Communism. But it was also the time when genuine social change took place, when the revival of aspirations and equality in access to education, as well as the professional activities of women were, on the one hand, a necessity, and on the other, a universally accepted social fact.

Małgorzata Hillar declared herself a feminist as late as in an *ex post* confession, formulated at the end of her life, after several years of silence and absence from cultural life. In the introduction to her last volume of poetry she reveals the rejection by her mother (that she compensated for with the cult of the Virgin Mary) to have been the psychological background of her literary work. She continues: “I am a woman – and a feminist, fully aware of my womanhood and accepting it as my otherness. I have never tried to resemble men to achieve equality, in fact, I cherish my otherness, remaining acutely aware of the evident discrimination of women. Of social discrimination, as well as economical, political, religious, and all other kinds of discrimination.”²⁸ She nonetheless believed her feminist work to be marginal: “I think I have written only two feminist poems.” She refers to two texts from *Czekanie na Dawida* [Waiting for David] (1967), a volume containing a 16-poem cycle devoted to motherhood. Hillar considers “Kropla deszczu” [A Drop of Rain] and “Życie jest jedno” [There is One Life] to be her feminist poems and – which seems to follow from her commentary – does not identify writing about womanhood and expressing the female experience with feminism.

In both poems there reappears a similar idea: that of male creativity as something destructive, responsible for starting wars, contrasted with the biological creativity of

²⁸ M. Hillar *Dwadzieścia lat minęło odkąd umarłam*, w: *Gotowość do Zmartwychwstania*, Warszawa 1995, s. 9-10.

women, one that brings life and peace. The male need for dominance is viewed as a hidden subtext of all invention and social discovery and two extremes: creative – though in fact destructive – masculinity and femininity entailing the pain of birth and sacrifice are divided by an abyss. This abyss could be crossed perhaps at some point in the future, by a matriarchal society. In *Czekanie na Dawida* (1967) Hillar considers the possibility of a women-built civilization. “When she/ takes over/ the world/ peace will follow” and as it is the last poem of the volume, the statement is strongly emphasized. A toned down version of the poem, from 1995, introduces a conditional “If she/ took over / the world, / peace would follow.”²⁹ The possibility of a “matriarchate” is, thus, believed to be an impossible hypothesis.

It is difficult to confront those texts with philosophical questions. Hillar’s poems are a confession intertwined with assessment of the present and condemnation of war. They use stereotypes and today often seem to be a slightly subdued and “femininely” transformed variety of the ideological vision back from the day of People’s Republic. Womanhood is an impassable condition here and appears to be marked by an unsolvable drama: the need for male love and at the same time the impossibility to build an understanding more permanent than the temporary relief found in the act of love. Also, the child reveals itself as the Other in the poems on motherhood, desired but objectified and impossible to be expressed as a subject, a “pink human suckling pig” from “Karmiąca.” [Nursing].

However, the ease with which Hillar’s vision could be overthrown is deceptive. The construction of the subject in her poems proves, in fact, the validity of the feminist critique of patriarchy – the mystified, metaphysical construction of the female subject confronted with the male “Self” tightens the female space so that it becomes a prison. She is rejected by the Symbolic order, there is, in fact, no place for her at all, not even enough for her to speak. Banished from culture and harmed by nature all she can do is fall silent.

Through a vision of physical, biological womanhood Anna Świrszczyńska successfully presents both the social drama of the woman and her own vision of liberation through overcoming the dualism of body and soul. She matured long for this, in 1970, in a note included in *Poezje Wybrane* [Selected Poems] she still believed the prose poem to be her artistic speciality. Referring to this period of her work, which began in the 30s, Czesław Miłosz used the notions of “intertextuality” and “calligraphy.” Future feminism is only foreshadowed by the multitude of female cultural heroes in her work, such as Helen, Madame Bovary or Valkyrie.³⁰ The woman is seen as placed inside male culture, her presence is emphasized but without breaking the dominating code. She does not appear as a recognizable voice but as a character. In one of the poems describing a great concert at the court of a ruler of the past, next to the king there “squirms his lush favorite, glittering

²⁹ M. Hillar, *Czekanie na Dawida*. Warszawa 1967. 67; M. Hillar *Gotowość do...*, p. 83. I am indebted for this observation to Agnieszka Nietresta’s research published in: *Małgorzata Hillar. Księżniczka wyobraźni*. Kraków 2003.

³⁰ Cz. Miłosz *Jakiegoż to gościa melisny. O Annie Świrszczyńskiej*, Kraków 1996.

with the pomp of endearing charm. Her chest heaves rapidly. She smiles a wicked and then a painful smile. His Majesty looks the other way.”³¹ The question of identity of the speaking subject is not strongly pronounced here, and it would not require much effort to prove that it could be contained by the formula of androgyny. For example, in the prose poem “Sztuka” [Art], referred to by Miłosz as well, there is a talk of the desire to jest, interwoven with the tendency to be serious. The speaker describes the latter as a “deadly seriousness of the dying man who refers to candles as candles and to the wife as the wife.” The equation of manhood and masculinity is treated as something obvious but there is also a hidden assumption that I (the speaking poet) is him. But Świrszczyńska early work also contains elements of social provocation. In the cycle of portraits, *Sześć kobiet*, [Six women] “Amelia czyli Kobieta z charakterem” [Amelia, or Woman of Character] makes an appearance:

Amelia likes kissing men she does not love. So she kisses strange men.
She says:
This, precisely, is nice, as it is indecent.
To be indecent is to confirm one’s freedom.
In matters of love Amelia is an intellectual.³²

“Kissing” should probably be read here as a socially acceptable expression for having sex – as in the poetry of Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska or Halina Poświatowska.

The new formula of corporeal identity emerged gradually in Świrszczyńska’s writing, first in *Czarne słowa* [Black Words], in poems described as “African stylizations,” and matured as late as the 70s, when the author herself was about 60. *Jestem baba* (1972) [I Am Baba] can be considered a breakthrough, tied to a fundamental shift in style, to a rejection of culturalism, to factography, and laconic expression. The title of the volume is a bold and irreverent assertion of identity. “Baba” is disrespectful in Polish; it is a folk expression referring to an old woman. In folk tales “baba” and “dziad” [the male equivalent of baba] are always coupled, and “dziad” also means someone poor, sometimes even a “beggar” (interestingly, the word for the female beggar is “dziadówka.” [dziad with a *fem. dim.* ending]) The semantic field of “baba” is broad and includes the negativity of “ty babo” [direct address that borders on name calling]; or, more intensely: “babsztylu,” “babiszonie” [more pejorative forms of “baba” – “womanoid”]; but also the neutral, even warm, “babciu” [granny] in the mouth of a child; to the approving, self-descriptive “hej babki! [hey ladies!] let’s get down to work, we’ll show them!”

As she was going through this fundamental change, in 1973, Świrszczyńska talked about her poetic work in the introduction to *Poezje wybrane*: “Style is the poet’s enemy and it is most advantageous when it is non-existent. Let me explain it with a paradoxical shortcut: writers have two goals. The first one is to create their own style. The second – to destroy their own style. The latter is more difficult and

³¹ A. Świrszczyńska *Liryki zebrane*, Warszawa 1958, 44.

³² *Ibidem*, 136.

takes more time.”³³ Only after she moved beyond the layer of cultural stylization was Świrszczyńska able to openly put the question of womanhood in the center of attention; earlier it was a presence rather subdued, entangled in aestheticizations. Świrszczyńska’s new style is not her own invention only, anti-aestheticism manifested in the poetry of Różewicz seems to have been a convenient point of departure here, except in Różewicz the method of constatation, simplicity, and the rejection of metaphor serve a different purpose – to formulate an accusation against the Western civilization after the shock of mass annihilation. In Świrszczyńska, a connection between the war experience and a change in style is also present – in the poems about the Warsaw Uprising from *Budowałam barykadę* [I Built a Barricade] (1974). The shock of war, stylistic change, and the possibility of creating a new subject all found a common denominator in the need for destruction to maintain relevance.

Jestem baba is a manifesto not of female poetry but of “baba” poetry, with its triumph of womanhood devoid of belying mysticism. Świrszczyńska positions her own corporeal sensations in relation to the experience of women disrespected the most: old peasant women, city beggars, wives of alcoholics, those giving birth in pain and those who die forgotten by everyone. The “Self” must be placed within a gaping amplitude of one’s own physical sensations that extends between temporary but boundless happiness and acute pain and utter despair, which in a romantic relationship with a man can also become the sign of intensity of life. Other women are included in the sense of empathy, the female “Self” understands them and describes them without much difficulty. Female identity is contrasted with the male only on one plane – that of social life, always seen from the outside and viewed as “baba’s” sub-condition. Men and women are equal in the Uprising episodes described in *Budowałam barykadę*, in the extreme and life-threatening situation. Their reactions are described as a capacity for sacrifice always contrasted with cowardice, while idealism is paradoxically coupled with practicality in both sexes. Similar equality appears also in the face of death. The difference reveals itself in the “normal world,” exposed by love and all that which is social; however, this does not directly concern the situation of the female speaker, the female persona of the poem. What we seem to be facing here is one of the paradoxes of the poetical vision of the world, a tendency to exclude the speaking “Self” from gender obligations and stereotypes. Seeing “from the inside” always changes the perspective.

The female “I” is, in a way, fuller, truer, closer to the existential truth because of the pain and experience of motherhood from which the body cannot be excluded. This, however, is not contrasted with the male experience of subjectivity. In love, the female “I” is so strong that it even views pain as an expression of the heat of emotion. A love relationship with a man resembles a duel “Our two hatreds / bite each other / with their beautiful white teeth” the poet says in an epigrammatic verse from *Szczęście jak psi ogon* [Happy As Dog’s Tail].³⁴ Only a friendship with the man,

³³ A Świrszczyńska, *Poezje wybrane*, Warszawa 1973.15. Quoted in Miłosz’s book and by Małgorzata Baranowska in „Symborska, Świrszczyńska – dwa bieguny codzienności.” *Sporne postaci polskiej literatury współczesnej*. Warszawa, 1996. 17..

³⁴ A. Świrszczyńska „Gryzą się” [Biting] *Szczęście jako psi ogon*. Kraków, 1978. 67.

most strongly pronounced in Świrszczyńska's last, posthumous volume, exhibits a possibility of a complete understanding.

The corporeal formula of womanhood in Świrszczyńska is a radical challenge to the centuries of tradition holding everything that is of the flesh as lower, and as a result something that must be denied, rejected, and contrasted with elevating spirituality. That Świrszczyńska re-evaluates the body is her great merit. It would be futile to attempt a deconstructive critique here and claim that the poet relies in fact on the linguistic construct of the body and not its identity, which the body does not have outside the cultural matrix; or that she practices a kind of "na ve realism" and utilizes metaphysical calques telling us to believe in the essence anchored outside the text. Świrszczyńska changes the matrix: she begins to build her vision of the human being beginning with herself as a woman and with her own body in order to create a certain kind of corporeal spirituality, not fully free from the dualism of body and soul but always assuming an irreducible physicality. In "Zostanę babką klozetowa" [I Will Be A Toilet Cleaning Lady] she talks about the soul as the good old "sister of the bladder and the bowel." The female protagonists of her poems are familiar and empathic figures: toilet cleaner, beggar, wife of a drunk, peasant, and an old mother forgotten by her children. There is no sense of strangeness or distance between their world and the emotions of the speaker that could result, for instance, from the difference in the educational background or the condition of the artist, someone socially aware, independent, and in control of her life. On the contrary, there is a possibility of identification.

Sometimes a playful fight between body and soul takes place (for instance in "Dusza i ciało na plaży," [Body and Soul On The Beach]), but the body has stronger arguments at its disposal. Existence itself is corporeal. But here also the drama of existence opens, resulting from its impermanence. "When I run, / I laugh with my feet // When I run, / I swallow the world with my feet // When I run, / I have ten feet // All my feet / shout. // I exist only / when I run."³⁵ "I Have Ten Feet" resembles, in a way, Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. The poem's motivations are different, though, as it shows the ecstatic sensation of movement from the inside. Instead of "I think, therefore I am," we are told "I run, so I exist." Almost ascetic, with their very simple language Świrszczyńska's poems are entangled in various polemic references to a stagnant tradition. Their heroine develops a female version of the "will to power," but she never once mentions Nietzsche because intertextuality, or debate, is not her point.

Two patterns, several models

Androgyny is a highly complex type of identity that does not result in a single model, and which contains varied cultural masculine and feminine ranges. Its shape is always an individually constructed mosaic. Its presence is usually discreet: the

³⁵ A. Świrszczyńska „Mam dziesięć nóg” [I Have Ten Feet] *Szczęśliwa jako psi ogon*. Kraków, 1978. 13.

speaking subject often simply avoids using grammatical forms that disclose gender, and the text can be read as both masculine and feminine. This way, the speaker of the poem neutralizes the compulsion to define each situation with regards to gender present in normal social life. This is also why androgyny is difficult to spot, as the appearance of a “neutral” utterance does not exclude incidental returns to femininity, or its strong accentuation in selected spheres and weak presence in others. Hłakowiczówna’s work is an opportunity to trace the motifs and the methods of constructing such a complex identity, quite common at the beginning of the century. Female androgyny is a typical formula of modernist individualism.³⁶

I believe it to be something more than just an adventure of gender in the period of Young Poland which was hostile towards women. It is a starting point for the development of one of the most common models of the “Self,” tied to the aspiration of female emancipation. The androgynous “I” establishes itself directly in the world, and does not view the romantic relationship with a man to be the only, the most important, and generally privileged model on which one’s self-creation is to be founded. Naturally, in several instances one could point out the poets’ dispersion in the dominant model; however, it needs to be stressed that androgyny does not entail a lack of female identification, but rather its co-existence with models identified culturally as “more masculine” and, at the same time, an awareness of non-finality of all description and the fluidity lurking beneath it. At the beginning of the century, such identification was an act of independence and courage, even though today the clarity of this option is blurred and unintelligible. It has found its continuation, however, and is the main voice in poetry written by women. Most poetic texts by Szyborska are undetermined. What draws attention is their rationalism and the ability to transform situations into intellectual generalizations. Their irony reveals a strong polemic intention towards the male stereotypes rather than a gentle one. Androgyny and anti-essentialism also characterize the construction of the subject in the poetry of Julia Hartwig, where the love relationship is a marginal experience in the process of constructing subjectivity.

Visions of womanhood as a strong, basic and irreducible part of identity (and not as a feature of inferiority, but on the contrary, an element of positive characterization) require a revolution of values. To base the positive vision of womanhood on the biologically defined sex, Świrszczyńska had to arrange the relation of nature and culture differently than it has been done before, assuming the former to be a fundamental dimension to which absolute truth is related. It was not a revolution of language in Polish poetry and so there are few instances that could be viewed as an implementation of the idea of *écriture féminine*. It is also difficult to view the biologically defined female identity as containable by mainstream feminism which energetically cuts itself off from the biological definitions as a gateway to the worst sort of determinism. Świrszczyńska’s poetry is close to Różewicz’s tradition. Identity

³⁶ Compare: G. Ritz „Młoda Polska a transgresja płciowa.” *Niż w labiryncie pożądania*. Warszawa. 2002. 111-136.

is a factor from the outside of the text and its textual representation does not require the construction of a different, feminine language: it assumes a new order of values. One could note, however, that what we are given on the level of text is not identity but a conviction of its existence outside the text, and as a result, a myth of identity. This is why Świrszczyńska wants to “destroy style”; at some point she gives up calligraphy she was close to debuting. After the “female revolution of values” she has to strengthen the referential dimension of the text so that she can reach through the word-transmitter to what really matters.

Those two patterns of identity do not exhaust the issue of poetic creations concerning womanhood; they only point to one of the lines of tension. The difficulty in capturing phenomena has several causes. The feminist revolution took place in Polish poetry without the feminist debate, today’s categories do not fully correspond to the historical situation. Sometimes one cannot even describe the internal convictions contained in the text with the categories proposed by Western feminism which continues to emphasize the constraint (and oppressiveness) of heterosexuality, whereas Polish poets willingly mythologize the heterosexual act of sex seeing in the process the value of rebellion, of crossing the cultural norm that in fact imposes silence.

Translation: Anna Warso